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# A STUDY OF WALTER PATER



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ARTHUR SYMONS

*Author of*

‘A Study of Thomas Hardy,’ ‘Studies in Strange Souls’

‘A Study of Oscar Wilde’

etc.

With a Portrait

LONDON

CHARLES J. SAWYER

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# A STUDY OF WALTER PATER

## I

THE genius of Walter Pater was, in every sense of the word, as unique as it was inexplicable. No genius can ever be flawless: nor was his. And yet how few writers have left behind them more flawless prose than the author of *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry*. And, apart from his genius and his at times perverse and exotic imagination, there was the man himself, to me, even now, unforgettable. Everything in Pater was in harmony, when you got used to its particular forms of expression: the heavy form, so slow and deliberate in movement, so settled in repose; the timid yet scrutinising eyes;



the mannered, yet so personal voice ; the exact, pausing speech, with its urbanity, its almost painful conscientiousness of utterance ; the whole outer mask, worn for protection and out of courtesy, yet moulded upon the truth of nature like a mask moulded upon the features which it covers. And the books themselves are the man, literally the man in many accents, turns of phrase : and, far more than that, the man himself, whom one felt through his few, friendly, intimate, serious words : the inner life of his soul coming close to us, in a slow and gradual revelation. He was quite content that his mind should 'keep as a solitary prisoner's own dream of a world' : it was that prisoner's dream of a world that it was his whole business as a writer to remember, to perpetuate. And, what he said of Leonardo da Vinci, might almost be said of himself—'Out of the secret

places of a unique temperament he brought forth strange blossoms and fruits hitherto unknown; and for him, the novel impression conveyed, the exquisite effect woven, counted as an end in itself: a perfect end.'

And then that fundamental saying of his: 'For the way to perfection is through a series of disgusts:' how often have I not said that to myself when, like every artist, one feels one has failed in perfection? Yes, to be disgusted with one's own work, means simply that one has to begin over again what one has failed in creating, and (to quote Coleridge), 'to go on evolving, just as a serpent moves, which makes a fulcrum of its own body and seems for ever twisting and untwisting its own strength.' And one must never forget the last great words of Blake at the end of the Catalogue of his pictures in 1809—'If

a man is master of his profession, he cannot be ignorant that he is so; and, if he is not employed by those who pretend to encourage art, and laugh in secret at the pretence of the ignorant, while he has every night dropped into his shoe, as soon as he puts it off, and puts out the candle, and gets into bed, a reward for the labours of the day such as the world cannot give, and patience and time await to give him all that the world can give.' Are not these words noble, lovely, pathetic, and prophetic? And so in due course, when Blake has been properly dead long enough, there is a little public which, bidding against itself, gambles cheerfully for the possession of the scraps of paper on which he sent in his account, against the taste of his age and the taste of all the ages. Swinburne wrote at the beginning of his book on Blake (1868) — 'In the year 1827, there died, after a

long dim life of labour, a man as worthy of remark and regret as any then famous. In his time he had little enough of recognition or regard from the world; and now that here and there one man and another begin to observe that after all this one was perhaps better worth notice and honour than most, the justice comes as usual somewhat late.'

Walter Pater, during his life, saw only three of his books pass into a second edition, and when he died in 1894 his death was not even mentioned by the newspapers, newspapers that had given columns to Robert Louis Stevenson. Now what more can be said of the eternally ignorant taste (if taste it may be called) of the prying multitude that can be likened to an open sewer, running down each side of the street, and displaying the foulness of every day, beating the bones of the buried with-

out pity, without shame, and without understanding, that gorges its insatiable appetite upon rumour, which is wind and noise? Nothing at all; only this. 'Ages are all equal: but genius is always above the age.'

The science of the Renaissance was divided, as it were, by a thousand refractions of things seen and unseen; so that when Leonardo, poring over his crucibles, desires no alchemist's achievement but the achievement of the impossible, his vision is concentrated into infinite experiences, known solely to himself; exactly as when, in his retirement in the villa of the Melzi, his imagination is stirred feverishly as he writes detached notes, as he dashes off rapid drawings; and, always, not for other men's pleasure, but simply for his own; careless, as I think few men of genius have ever been,

of anything but the moment's work, the instant's inspiration. And what is also certain is, that da Vinci — like Shakespeare — created, ambiguously for all the rest of the world, flesh that is flesh and not flesh, bodies that are bodies and not bodies, by something inexplicable in their genius; something nervous, magnetic, overwhelming; and, to such an extent, that if one chooses to call to mind the greatest men of genius who have existed, this Painter and this Dramatist must take their places beside Æschylus and beside Balzac.

Of Leonardo da Vinci Pater has said: 'Curiosity and the desire of beauty—these are the two elementary forces in his genius; curiosity often in conflict with the desire of beauty, but generally in unison with it, a type of subtle and curious grace.' Certainly the desire of perfection is, in da Vinci, organic; so

much so, that there remains in him always the desire, as well as the aim, of attaining nothing less than finality, which he achieves more finally than any of the other Italian painters; and, mixed with all these, is that mystery which is only one part of his magic.

Is all this mystery and beauty, then, only style, and acquired style? Fortunate time, when style had become of such subtlety that it affects us, to-day, as if it were actually a part of the soul! But was there not, in Leonardo, a special quality, which goes some way to account for this? Does it not happen to us, as we look at one of his mysterious faces, to seem to distinguish, in the eyes reluctant to let out their secret, some glimpse, not of the soul of Mona Lisa, nor of the Virgin of the Rocks, but of our own, retreating, elusive, not yet recognised soul? Just so, I fancy, Leonardo

may have revealed their own souls to Luini and to Solario, and in such a way that for those men it was no longer possible to see themselves without something of a new atmosphere about them, the atmosphere of those whom Leonardo had drawn to him out of the wisdom of secret and eternal things. With men like Leonardo style is, really, the soul, and their influence on others the influence of those who have discovered a little more of the unknown, adding, as it were, new faculties to the human soul.

Two men of genius, in our own generation, have revealed for all time the always inexplicable magic of Leonardo da Vinci; Walter Pater in his prose and Dante Gabriel Rossetti in his sonnet. It is impossible not to quote this lyrical prose:

The presence that rose thus so strangely beside the waters, is expressive of what in



the ways of a thousand years men had come to desire. Hers is the head upon which all 'the ends of the world are come,' and the eyelids are a little weary. It is a beauty wrought out from within upon the flesh, the deposit, little cell by cell, of strange thoughts and fantastic reveries and exquisite passions. . . . All the thoughts and experience of the world have etched and moulded there, in that which they have of power to refine and make expressive the outward form, the animalism of Greece, the lust of Rome, the mysticism of the middle age with its spiritual ambition and imaginative loves, the return of the Pagan world, the sins of the Borgias. She is older than the rocks among which she sits ; like the vampire, she has been dead many times, and learned the secrets of the grave ; and has been a diver in deep seas, and keeps their fallen day about her ; and trafficked for strange webs with Eastern merchants ; and, as Leda, was the mother of Helen of Troy, and, as Saint Anne, the mother of Mary ; and all this has been to her but as the sound of lyres and flutes, and lives only in the delicacy with which it has moulded the changing lineaments, and tinged the eyelids and the hands.

Rossetti, whose criticisms of poets are as direct and inevitable as his finest verse,

was always his own best critic. He who said finally: 'The life-blood of rhymed translation is this—that a good poem shall not be turned into a bad one,' was as finally right on himself as he was on others in his unsurpassable revision of one of the most imaginative sonnets ever written: *For a Venetian Pastoral by Giorgione*. Certainly no poem of his shows more plainly the strength and wealth of the workman's lavish yet studious hand. And, in this sonnet as in the one on Leonardo, there is the absolute transfusion of a spirit that seemed incommunicable from one master's hand to another's. Only in the Leonardo, which I shall quote, there is none of the sovereign oppression of absolute beauty and the nakedness of burning life that I find in the *Fête Champêtre*. For in this divine picture the romantic spirit is born, and with it modern

art. Here we see Whistler and the Japanese: a picture content to be no more than a picture: 'an instant made eternity,' a moment of colour, of atmosphere, of the noon's intense heat, of faultless circumstance. It is a pause in music, and life itself waits, while men and women are for a moment happy and content and without desire; these, content to be beautiful and to be no more than a strain of music; to those others, who are content to know that the hour is music.

Here, then, is Rossetti's version of the beauty of mysterious peace which broods over the Virgin of the Rocks:

Mother, is this the darkness of the end,  
The Shadow of Death? and is that outer  
    sea  
Infinite imminent Eternity?  
And does the death-pang by man's seed  
    sustained

In Time's each instant cause thy face to  
bend  
Its silent prayer upon the Son, while He  
Blesses the dead with His hand silently  
To His long day which hours no more  
offend?

Mother of grace, the pass is difficult,  
Keen as these rocks, and the bewildered  
souls  
Throng it like echoes, blindly shudder-  
ing through.  
Thy name, O Lord, each spirit's voice  
extols,  
Whose peace abides in the dark avenue  
Amid the bitterness of things occult.

So Leonardo, who said 'that figure  
is not good which does not express  
through its gestures the passions of its  
soul,' becomes, more than any other  
painter, the painter of the soul. He has  
created, not only in the Gioconda, a  
clairvoyant smile, which is the smile of a  
mysterious wisdom hidden in things; he  
has created the motion of great waters;  
he has created types of beauty so exotic

that they are fascinating only to those who are drawn into the unmirrored depths of this dreamless mirror. He invents a new form of landscape subtle and sorcerous, and a whole new movement for an equestrian statue; besides inventing—what did not this miraculous man invent!—the first quite simple and natural treatment of the Virgin and Child. So, as he was content to do nothing as it had been done before, he creates in the Gioconda a new art of portrait painting; and, in her, so disquieting, that her eyes, as they follow you persistently, seem to ask one knows not what impenetrable and seductive question, on which all one's happiness might depend. Mysterious and enigmatical as she is, there is in her face none of the melancholy—which is part of the melancholy of Venice—that allures one's senses in a famous picture in the Accademia; where,

the feast being over, and the wine drunk, something seems to possess the woman, setting those pensive lines about her lips, which will smile again when she has lifted her eyelids.

## II

TURNING from the criticisms of literature to the studies in painting, we see precisely the same qualities, but not, I think, precisely the same results. In a sentence of the essay on *The School of Giorgione*, which is perhaps the most nicely balanced of all his essays on painting, Walter Pater defines, with great precision :

In its primary aspect, a great picture has no more definite message for us than an accidental play of sunlight and shadow for a few moments on the wall or floor: is itself, in truth, a space of such fallen light, caught as the colours are caught in an Eastern carpet, but refined upon, and dealt with more subtly and exquisitely than by nature itself.

But for the most part it was not in this spirit that he wrote of pictures. His criticism of pictures is indeed creative, in a fuller sense than his criticism of

books ; and, in the necessity of things, dealing with an art which, as he admitted, has, in its primary aspect, no more definite message for us than the sunlight on the floor, he not merely divined, but also added, out of the most sympathetic knowledge, certainty. It is one thing to interpret the meaning of a book ; quite another to interpret the meaning of a picture. Take, for instance, the essay on Botticelli. That was the first sympathetic study which had appeared in English of a painter at that time but little known ; and it contains some of Pater's most exquisite writing. All that he writes, of those angels ' who, in the revolt of Lucifer, were neither for Jehovah nor for His enemies,' of that sense in the painter of ' the wistfulness of exiles,' represents, certainly, the impression made upon his own mind by these pictures, and, as such, has an inter-



pretative value, apart from its beauty as a piece of writing. But it is, after all, a speculation before a canvas, a literary fantasy ; a possible interpretation, if you will, of one mood in the painter, a single side of his intention ; it is not a criticism, inevitable as that criticism of Wordsworth's art, of the art of Botticelli. Botticelli has the secret of the Greek rhythm and nothing in his feeling comes to disturb that rhythm. Whether he paints the Birth of Venus or of Christ, he has the same pure curiosity and indifference : each to him is a picture and nothing more than a picture. The pensive unconcern in the Virgin's face is an expression chosen for its melancholy grace and wistful charm. And this picture is created by one who gave his genius equally, it might be, to Venus rising naked out of the waves, and to the Virgin enthroned and indifferent

among indifferent angels. Judith, leaving the tent of Holofernes whom she has slain, is seen going home in the midst of her enemies with the olive-branch and the sword held in her hand. All his figures are hypnotised by that magic of his which is perverse and subtle: and all these, enduring the pressure of an immense weariness, have in their eyes the look of those who do or who endure great things in a dream.

Had Walter Pater devoted himself exclusively to art criticism, there is no doubt that, in a sense, he would have been a great art critic. There are essays—such as his unsurpassable *Leonardo da Vinci*, his lovely and all but final interpretation of Botticelli, and his *School of Giorgione*—in which the essential principles of the art of painting are divined and interpreted with extraordinary subtlety. I remember hearing him

say that, as he grew older, books interested him less and less, pictures delighted him more and more. Yet, even in that admirable essay on Giorgione, he left out all mention of *The Geometricians* in the Vienna Gallery. So, writing subtly on Coleridge, he left out *Kubla Khan*. As it was, he corrected many of the hasty and generous errors of Ruskin and helped to bring criticism to a wiser and more tolerant attitude towards the Arts.

In his essay on Giorgione, in which he came perhaps nearer to a complete and final disentangling of the meaning and functions of the Arts than any writer on æsthetics has yet done, we are told : ‘ All art constantly aspires towards the condition of music ; ’ and again—

It is the art of music which most completely realises this artistic ideal, this perfect identification of matter and form. In its consummate moments, the end is not distinct from the means, the form from the matter,

the subject from the expression ; they inhere in and completely saturate each other ; and to it, therefore, . . . all the arts may be supposed constantly to tend and aspire. In music, then, rather than in poetry, is to be found the true type or measure of perfected art.

This is the beginning of Pater's essay :

It is the mistake of much popular criticism to regard poetry, music, and painting—all the various products of art—as but translations into different languages of one and the same fixed quantity of imaginative thought, supplemented by certain technical qualities of colour, in painting ; of sound, in music ; of rhythmical words, in poetry. In this way, the sensuous element in art, and with it almost everything in art that is essentially artistic, is made a matter of indifference ; and a clear apprehension of the opposite principle—that the sensuous material of each art brings with it a special phase or quality of beauty, untranslatable into the forms of any other, an order of impressions distinct in kind—is the beginning of all true æsthetic criticism.

In writing of the school of Giorgione, Pater, unfortunately, relied upon criticism

of so devastating a nature as to have reduced the painter's surviving work almost to a solitary picture — 'like Sordello's one fragment of lovely verse.' Of the 'six or eight famous pictures at Dresden, Florence, and the Louvre' that had been attributed to him he says, 'It is now known that only one is certainly from Giorgione's hand,' and, 'What remains of the most vivid and stimulating of the Venetian masters, a live flame, as it seemed, in those old shadowy times, has been reduced almost to a name by his most recent critics.'

Opinions will always differ as to the pictures that can, with certainty, be assigned to Giorgione; but my own list, drawn up after having visited all the Galleries of Europe, including the Hermitage and the Prado, amounts to eleven in all, and they are — the *Trial of Moses*, *Judgment of*

*Solomon*, and *Knight of Malta*, in the Uffizzi; the *Portrait of a Lady* in the Borghese Gallery; the *Sleeping Venus* at Dresden; the *Geometricians* (also known as *The Three Philosophers*) at Vienna; the picture from the Palazzo Giovanelli at Venice exhibited at Burlington House in 1930 as *The Tempest*, but which I prefer to call *The Gipsy Madonna*; the *Madonna with St Roch and St Francis* in the Prado, Madrid; a *Portrait of a Man*—perhaps Antonio Brocardo—at Budapest; the Castelfranco altar-piece, *The Virgin and Child with St Francis and St Liberale*; and *Le Fête Champêtre* in the Louvre.

Pater's false guides led him to believe that the wonderful *Concert* in the Pitti Palace, certainly painted by Titian when under the influence of Giorgione, was 'undoubtedly Giorgione's,' and to acclaim it as 'the standard of Giorgione's

genuine work,' a claim that cannot now be supported; but it seems to me inconceivable that Pater should have been so misled as to accept the attribution of one of the artist's most wonderful pictures, the *Fête Champêtre*, to 'an imitator of Sebastiano del Piombo.' And yet, relying on his instinct, he wrote beautifully about it, referring to a 'favourite picture in the Louvre, the subject of a delightful sonnet by a poet whose own painted work often comes to mind as one ponders over these precious things,' Rossetti. And of it he writes: 'the presence of water—the well or marble-rimmed pool, the drawing or pouring of water, as the woman pours it from a pitcher with her jewelled hand in the *Fête Champêtre*, listening, perhaps, to the cool sound as it falls, blent with the music of the pipes—is as characteristic, and almost as suggestive, as that of music itself.'

A beautiful passage which Pater left out when he reprinted his essay on Giorgione is worth while giving here :

Who, in some such perfect moment, when the harmony of things inward and outward beat itself out so truly and with a sense of receptivity, with entire inaction on our part, some messenger from the real soul of things must be on his way to one, has not felt the desire to perpetuate all that, just so, to suspend it in every particular circumstance, with the portrait of just that one spray of leaves lifted just so high against the sky, above the well, for ever? A desire how bewildering with the question whether there be indeed any place wherein these desirable moments take permanent refuge. Well! in the school of Giorgione you drink water, perfume, music, lie in receptive humour thus for ever, and the satisfying moment is assured.

How often have I not fallen into that mood of pure idleness and pure receptivity when in Venice under the intense heat I used to lie back in a gondola, feeling myself at every instant in harmony with its rhythm as it glided along



the lagoons and then shot suddenly round corner after corner, from a narrow canal to a narrower one, without as much as grazing the prow of the gondola which meets you. So I felt in 1894, when I had the luck of seeing the great *serenata* when the late King of Italy and the present ex-Kaiser of Germany played that little Masque of Kings. The *galleggiata* with its five thousand lights, a great floating dome of crystals, started from the Rialto; the luminous house of sound floated slowly, almost imperceptibly, down the Grand Canal, a black cluster of gondolas before it and behind it. And as we floated imperceptibly down it seemed as if the palaces on each side of us were afloat too, drifting past us, to the sound of music, through a night brilliant with strange fires. And that, certainly, might well be called a night of receptivity.

### III

I HAVE always thought that Pater's Conclusion to his book on the Renaissance is one of the most imaginative and perfect and intensely personal confessions that he ever wrote. I have never forgotten such sentences as these :

Not the fruit of experience, but experience itself, is the end. A counted number of pulses only is given to us of a variegated, dramatic life. . . . How shall we pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy? To burn always with this hard, gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy, is success in life.

Pater refers here to the awakening of the literary sense in Rousseau, and how an undefinable taint of death had always clung about him. . . . He asked himself how he might make as much as possible of the interval that remained ; and he was not biased

by anything in his previous life when he decided that it must be by intellectual excitement, which he found just then in the clear, fresh writings of Voltaire.

To Pater it was, in fact, 'in the terrible tragedy of Rousseau that French romanticism, with much else, begins: reading his *Confessions* we seem actually to assist at the birth of this new, strong spirit on the French mind.' And in this sordid and eloquent figure he saw his strangeness, his distortion; the *cor laceratum*. And this is he who begins his *Confessions* with the proclamation of his ego: that he desires to show to his equals a man in all the truth of nature: '*et cet homme, ce sera moi. Moi seul.*' He says also, 'I am not made like anyone else I have ever seen; yet, if I am not better, at least I am different.'

To the great religious thinker of the previous century—to Pascal—that man

of intense genius, whose sense of the divine wrath implacably lifted against him thrust into many a spiritual and physical ambush—Montaigne figured as emphatically on the wrong side, not merely because ‘he that is not *with* us, is *against* us.’ ‘As for Pascal’s *Thoughts*,’ said Pater, ‘we shall never understand them unless we realise the under-texture in them of Montaigne’s very phrases, the fascination the *Essays* had for Pascal in his capacity of one of the children of light, as giving a veritable *compte rendu* of the Satanic course of this world since the Fall, set forth with all the gifts of Satan, the veritable light on things he has at his disposal.’ In Clermont-Ferrand the mountainous soul of Pascal seems to have become less obscure. In Pascal it was what is Celt that bursts through rock and stone like a volcanic fire. Pascal, I said to myself, as I

wandered in the intense heat of August in those shadowless streets, in his work, for all his clear austerity, his hard intellectual mathematics, to which he brings an imagination which is light itself, is for ever conscious of the subterranean fires, at work in some gulf under the earth, which they mould to their purpose.

However you may try to convince yourself of that distinction which is drawn between this form of art and that, a work of art can be judged only from two standpoints: the standpoint from which its art is measured entirely by its morality, and the standpoint from which its morality is measured entirely by its art. Nor do I affect to doubt that the creation of the supreme emotion is a higher form of art than the reflection of the most exquisite sensation, the evocation of the most magical impression. I claim only

an equal liberty for the rendering of every mood of that variable and inexplicable and contradictory creature which we call ourselves, of every aspect under which we are gifted or condemned to apprehend the beauty and strangeness and curiosity of the visible world. I am one of those for whom the world exists, very actively : knowing as I do that we can see or receive, in people or things, only our own part of them : the vision rising in our own eyes, the passion rising in our own hearts.

It always seemed to me that Pater drew up into himself, not with any thirst for an impossible eternity, but, with wave after wave of sensation, every form of earthly beauty and of wisdom and a sense of things human which was partly that of the lover and the priest. And it is all, the criticism, *Marius the Epicurean*, the *Imaginary Portraits*, his essays on poets and men of letters, and

on the places he had visited abroad, and on the pictures he had seen and had so carefully studied, a Confession, *la vraie vérité* (as he was fond of saying), about the world he lived in, catching as he did with his unerring instinct every tangible moment as it passed. Pleasure, to him, was never less than the essence of all experience, and not merely all that is rarest in sensation. He had, like Lamb, whose genius he admired, a sense of religion, of that old-world religion which is Catholic. And he wrote: 'For Charles Lamb, such form of religion becomes the solemn background on which the nearer and more exciting objects of his immediate experience relieve themselves. . . . And, in truth, to men of Lamb's delicately attuned temperament mere physical stillness has its full value; such natures seeming to long for it sometimes, as for no merely nega-

tive thing, with a sort of mystical sensuality.' Pater had a delicately attuned temperament, nor was he lacking in a kind of purely mystical sensuality.

'Only be sure it is passion,' he said of that spirit of divine motion to which he appealed for the quickening of our sense of life and of ourselves; 'be sure,' he said, 'that it does yield you the fruit of a quickened, multiplied consciousness.' 'The herb, the wine, the gem,' of the Preface to his *Renaissance* tended more and more to become, under less outward symbols of perfection, the discovery of new faculties and more privileged apprehensions by which the imaginative regeneration of the world would come to pass, and, with this, a brooding over 'what the soul passes, and must pass, through, *aux abois* with nothingness, or with those mysterious



offended powers that may really occupy it.'

The last essay Pater wrote, on which he was engaged during the last hours of his life, on Pascal, breaks off in the middle of a sentence, a sentence that seems to me typical of the man himself: 'Now in him the imagination itself was like a physical malady, troubling, disturbing, or in active collision with it . . .' is, in every sense of the word, his final Epilogue, and that to a life which ended too briefly—before it completed its fifty-fifth year—an existence in which his inner life, so peculiarly his own, made him one of the most lovable and reserved men and, to those who rightly apprehended him, the most fascinating. He was not only in literature a living counsel of perfection; he was the most helpful and generous of private friends.

I was rather surprised when Pater spoke of the Goncourts with admiration tempered by dislike. Their books often repelled him, yet their way of doing things seemed to him just the way things should be done; and done before almost anyone else. He often read *Madame Gervaisais*, and he spoke of *Chérie* (for all its 'immodesty') as an admirable thing, and a model for all such studies. Thinking when I was in Paris that Pater seemed to me the only English writer who had ever handled language at all in their manner and spirit, I repeated to Edmond de Goncourt what Pater had said of him, trying to give him some idea of what Pater's work was like; and he lamented that his ignorance of English prevented him from what he instinctively realised would be so intimate an enjoyment. Pater was of course far more scrupulous, more limited in his

choice of epithet, less feverish in his variations of cadence; for he dealt with another subject-matter, and naturally so, and was careful of another kind of truth. But with both there was that passionately intent preoccupation with 'the delicacies of fine literature'; both achieved a style of the most personal sincerity.

The Goncourts' vision of reality might almost be called an exaggerated sense of the truth of things; such a sense as distressed nerves inflict upon one, sharpening the acuteness of every sensation; or somewhat such a sense as one derives from *haschisch*, which simply intensifies, yet in a veiled and fragrant way, the charm or the disagreeableness of outward things, the notion of time, the notion of space. What the Goncourts paint is the subtler poetry of reality, its unusual aspects, and they evoke it fleetingly, like

Whistler; they do not render it in hard outline, like Flaubert, like Manet. Compare the descriptions, which form so large a part of the work of the Goncourts, with those of Théophile Gautier, who may reasonably be said to have introduced the practice of writing about places and also the exact vision of them. The Goncourts only tell you the things that Gautier leaves out: they find new, fantastic points of view, discover secrets in things, curiosities of beauty, often acute, distressing, in the aspects of quite ordinary places. They see things as an artist of the impressionist kind might see them; seeing them indeed always very consciously with a very deliberate attempt upon them, in just that partial selecting, creative way in which an artist looks at things for the purpose of making a picture. Their unique care (like that of Pater) is that the phrase shall live,

palpitate, shall be alert, exactly expressive, super-subtle in expression; and they prefer indeed a certain perversity in their relations with language, which they would have not merely a passionate and sensuous thing, but complex with all the curiosity of a delicately depraved instinct. The Goncourts invented a new language; it is their distinction; it is the most wonderful of their inventions: and they invented it in order to render new sensations, a new vision of things.

To Pater Prosper Mérimée was the summary of that century of disillusionment in which the ancient landmarks had been removed: and, as for his style, it was as if 'he but held up to view, as a piece of evidence, some harshly dyed oriental carpet from the sumptuous floor of the Kremlin, on which blood had fallen.'

Mérimée as a writer belongs to the race of Laclos and of Stendhal, a race essentially French : and we find him representing a little coldly, as it seemed, the claims of mere impassioned intellect, at work on passionate problems, among those people of the Romantic period to whom emotion, evident emotion, was everything. In his subjects he is as 'Romantic' as Victor Hugo or Gautier ; he adds, even, a peculiar flavour of cruelty to the Romantic ingredients. But he distinguishes sharply, as French writers before him had so well known how to do, between the passion one is recounting and the moved or unmoved way in which one chooses to tell it. To Mérimée art was a very formal thing, almost a part of learning ; it was a thing to be done with a clear head, reflectively, with a calm mastery of even the most vivid material. While others, at that time,

were intoxicating themselves with strange sensations, hoping that 'nature would take the pen out of their hands and write,' just at the moment when their own thoughts became less coherent, Mérimée went quietly to work over something a little abnormal which he had found in nature, with as disinterested, as scholarly, as mentally reserved an interest as if it were one of those Gothic monuments which he inspected to such good purpose, with so little sympathy. His own emotion, so far as it is roused, seems to him an extraneous thing, a thing to be concealed, if not a little ashamed of. It is the thing itself he wishes to give you, not his feelings about it; and his theory is that if the thing itself can only be made to stand and speak before the reader, the reader will supply for himself all the feeling that is needed, all the feeling that would be

called out in nature by a perfectly clear sight of just such passions in action.

Once, when Pater and I were walking in Oxford, he pointed to a window and said, with a slow smile: 'That is where I get my Zolas.' He was always on his guard in regard to books: and he explained to me that he was always writing something, and that while he was writing he did not allow himself to read anything which might possibly affect him, by bringing a new current of emotion to bear upon him. The fact is that he was to a high degree highly self-centred, and that during his thirty years of literary labour he never faltered nor did he ever swerve from his own path. Just as Pater read Flaubert and Goncourt because they were intellectual neighbours, so he could read Zola knowing that there would be nothing to distract him.



#### IV

PATER'S *Studies in the Renaissance* seems to me the most beautiful book of prose in our literature. Nothing in it is left to inspiration; but it is all inspired. Here is a writer who, like Baudelaire, would better nature; and in this goldsmith's work of his prose he too has 'rêve le miracle d'une prose poétique, musicale sans rythme et sans rime.' An almost oppressive quiet, a quiet which seems to exhale an atmosphere heavy with the odour of tropical flowers, broods over these pages: a subdued light shadows them. The most felicitous touches come we know not whence, 'a breath, a flame in the doorway, a feather in the wind'; here are the simplest words, but they take colour from each other by the cunning accident of their placing in

the sentence, 'the subtle spiritual fire kindling from word to word.'

In this book prose seems to have conquered a new province. When *Marius the Epicurean* appeared it was in a less coloured manner of writing that the 'sensations and ideas' of that reticent, wise, and human soul were given to the world. But the style of *Marius*, in its more arduous self-repression, has a graver note, and brings with it a severer kind of beauty.

In this book and in the *Imaginary Portraits* of 1887, which seems to me to show his imaginative and artistic faculties at their point of most perfect fusion, Pater has not endeavoured to create characters in whom the flesh and blood should seem to be that of life itself; he had not the energy of creation, and he was content with a more shadowy life than theirs for the children of his dreams. Each, with

perhaps one exception, is the study of a soul, or rather of a consciousness. I do not mean to say that I attribute to Pater himself the philosophical theories of Sebastian van Storck, or the artistic ideals of Duke Carl of Rosenmold. I mean that the attitude of mind, the outlook, in the most general sense, is always limited and directed in a certain way, giving one always the picture of a delicate, subtle, aspiring, unsatisfied personality, open to all impressions, living chiefly by sensations, little anxious to reap any of the rich harvest of its intangible but keenly possessed gains; a personality withdrawn from action, which it despises or dreads, solitary with its ideals, in the circle of its 'exquisite moments,' in the Palace of Art, where it is never quite at rest. It is somewhat such a soul, I have thought, as that which Browning has traced in *Sordello*;

indeed, when reading for the first time *Marius the Epicurean*, I was struck by a certain resemblance between the record of the sensations and ideas of Marius of White-Nights and that of the sensations and events of Sordello of Goito.

The style of the *Imaginary Portraits* is the ripest, the most varied and flawless, their art the most assured and masterly, of any of Pater's books. And of the four portraits the most wonderful seems to me the poem, for it is really a poem, named *Denys l'Auxerrois*. For once, it is not a study of a soul, but of a myth; a transposition (in which one hardly knows whether to admire most the learning, the ingenuity, or the subtle imagination) of that strangest myth of the Greeks, the 'Pagan after-thought' of Dionysus Zagreus, into the conditions of mediæval life. Here is prose so coloured, so modulated, as to have captured, along with

almost every sort of poetic richness, and in a rhythm which is essentially the rhythm of prose, even the suggestiveness of poetry, that most volatile and unseizable property, of which prose has so rarely been able to possess itself. The style of *Denys l'Auxerrois* has a subdued heat, a veiled richness of colour, which contrasts curiously with the silver-grey coolness of *A Prince of Court Painters*, the chill, more leaden grey of *Sebastian van Storck*, though it has a certain affinity, perhaps, with the more variously tinted canvas of *Duke Carl of Rosenmold*. The mirror is held up to Watteau while he struggles desperately or hesitatingly forward, snatching from art one after another of her reticent secrets; then, with a stroke, it is broken, and this artist in immortal things sinks out of sight, into a narrow grave of red earth. The mirror is held up to Sebastian as he moves deliberately, coldly,

onward in the midst of a warm life which has so little attraction for him, freeing himself one by one from all obstructions to a clear philosophical equilibrium; and the mirror is broken with a like suddenness, and the seeker disappears from our sight, to find, perhaps, what he had sought. It is held up to Duke Carl, the seeker after the satisfying things of art and experience, the dilettante in material and spiritual enjoyment, the experimenter in life; and again it is broken, with an almost terrifying shock, just as he has come to a certain rash crisis: is it a step upward or downward? a step, certainly, towards the concrete, towards a possible material felicity.

In his Preface to the *Renaissance* Pater applies certain tests, which show his fastidiousness as a creative critic, always or almost always guided by the flawless instinct which he shares with

Baudelaire. And he carries this to its farthest possible limits, and may almost be said never, except by implication, to condemn anything. 'What is this song or picture, this engaging personality, presented in life or in a book, to *me*? What effect does it really produce on me? . . . How is my nature modified by its presence, and under its influence?'

The æsthetic critic regards all the objects with which he has to do, all works of art, and the fairer forms of nature and human life, as powers or forces producing pleasurable sensations, each of a more or less peculiar and unique kind. This influence he feels, and wishes to explain, analysing and reducing it to its elements. To him, the picture, the landscape, the engaging personality in life or in a book, *La Gioconda*, the hills of Carrara, Pico of Mirandola, are valuable for their virtues, as we say in speaking of a herb, a wine, a gem; for the property each has of affecting one with a special, a unique, impression of pleasure.

To this statement of what was always the aim of Pater in criticism, I would

add, from the later essay on Wordsworth, a further statement, applying it, as he there does, to the criticism of literature. 'What special sense,' he asks, 'does Wordsworth exercise, and what instincts does he satisfy? What are the subjects and the motives which in him excite the imaginative faculty? What are the qualities in things and persons which he values, the impression and sense of which he can convey to others, in an extraordinary way?'

He took the further step, the taking of which was what made him a creative artist in criticism. Take these sentences from *Gaston de Latour* :

This poetry took possession of the lily in one's hand, and projecting it into a visionary distance, shed upon the body of the flower the soul of its beauty. . . . As at the touch of a wizard something more came into the rose than its own natural blush. . . . The juice in the flowers, when Ronsard named them, was like wine or blood. It was such a coloured



thing ; though the grey things also, the cool things, all the fresher for the contrast—with a freshness, again, that seemed to touch and cool the soul—found their account there ; the clangorous passage of the birds at night foretokening rain, the moan of the wind at the door, the wind's self made visible over the yielding corn. It was thus Gaston understood the poetry of Ronsard, generously expanding it to the full measure of its intention.

That is what Pater does in his criticisms, in which a criticism is a divining-rod over hidden springs. He has a unique quality of seeing, through every imperfection, the perfect work, the work as the artist saw it, as he strove to make it, as he failed, in his measure, quite adequately to achieve it. He goes straight to what is fundamental, to the root of the matter, leaving all the rest out of the question. The essay on Wordsworth is perhaps the best example of this, for it has fallen to the lot of Wordsworth to suffer more than most at the hands of

interpreters. Here, at last, is a critic who can see in him 'a poet somewhat bolder and more passionate than might at first sight be supposed, but not too bold for true poetical taste; an unimpassioned writer, you might sometimes fancy, yet thinking the chief aim, in life and art alike, to be a certain deep emotion; ' one whose ' words are themselves thought and feeling; ' ' a master, an expert, in the art of impassioned contemplation.'

To Wordsworth, external things existed so visibly, just because they had no existence apart from the one eternal infinite being. But, later on, when we seem to have forgotten when the world is most real to us, it is by an actual recognition that we are reminded, as by one of those inexplicable flashes which carries some familiar and yet unseen vision through the eyes to the soul, of that other previous fragment of eternity

which the soul has known before it accepted the comfortable bondage and limit of time. And so, finally, the soul, carried by nature through nature, transported by visible beauty into the presence of the source of invisible beauty, sees, in one annihilating flash of memory, its own separate identity vanish away, to resume the infinite existence which that identity had but interrupted.

‘**F**OR it is with the delicacies of fine literature especially, its gradations of expression, its fine judgment, its pure sense of words, of vocabulary—things, alas, dying out in the English literature of the present, together with the appreciation of them in our literature of the past—that his literary mission is chiefly concerned.’ These words, applied by Pater to Charles Lamb, might reasonably enough have been applied to himself. ‘And yet,’ he notes, ‘delicate, refining, daintily epicurean, as he may seem, when he writes of giants such as Hogarth and Shakespeare, though often but in a stray note, you catch the sense of veneration with which those great names in past literature and art brooded over his intelligence, his undiminished impressibility by

the great effects in them.' He felt the genius of places.

In Lamb, London found its one poet :

The lighted shops of the Strand, and Fleet Street, the innumerable trades, tradesmen, and customers, coaches, waggons, play-houses, all the bustle and wickedness around about Covent Garden, the very women of the town, the watchmen, drunken scenes, rattles—life awake, if you awake, at all hours of the night, the impossibility of being dull in Fleet Street, the crowds, the very dirt and mud, the sun shining on houses and pavements, the print shops, the old bookstalls, parsons cheapening books, coffee-houses, steams of smoke from kitchens, the pantomime, London itself a pantomime and a masquerade—all these things work themselves into my mind and feed me, without a power of satiating me. The wonder of these sights impels me into night-walks about her crowded streets, and I often shed tears in the motley Strand from fulness of joy at so much life.

There, surely, is the poem of London, and it has almost the rapture of a lover's

catalogue. Lamb could not have existed in our mechanical city, out of which everything old and human has been driven by wheels and hammers and the fluids of noise and speed.

In Pater's reference to English Literature (which is contained in his essays from *The Guardian*) I find some valuable criticism of the course and capacities of English prose. Speaking of Elizabethan poetry, he says :

That powerful poetry was twin-brother to a prose of more varied, but certainly of wilder and more irregular power than the admirable, the typical, prose of Dryden. In Dryden, and his followers through the eighteenth century, we see the reaction against the exuberance and irregularity of that prose, no longer justified by power, but cognisable rather as bad taste. But such reaction was effective only because an age had come—the age of a negative, or agnostic philosophy—in which men's minds must needs be limited to the superficialities of things,

with a kind of narrowness amounting to a positive gift.

‘A kind of narrowness amounting to a positive gift!’ How perfectly that describes so much of the correct writing on which unimaginative writers in all ages are so confident in priding themselves. And could anything be more suggestive, coming from Pater more significant, or, rightly taken, more valuable in its counsel, than this summing up of the question of style in prose :

Well, the good quality of an age, the defect of which lies in the direction of intellectual anarchy and confusion, may well be eclecticism: in style, as in other things, it is well always to aim at the combination of as many excellences as possible—opposite excellences, it may be—those other beauties of prose. A busy age will hardly educate its writers in correctness. Let its writers make time to write English more as a learned language: and completing that correction of style which had only gone a certain way in the last century, raise the general level of language towards their own.

It was in the finest sense, certainly—in the sense in which he means it in this passage—that Pater himself wrote English as if it were a learned language. It did not seem to him that one should treat a living language, because it is living, and one's own, with less respect than a dead language which had once been living to the people of another nation.

Pater once told me that the most laborious task he ever set himself to accomplish was his essay on Style. This is the first sentence: 'Since all progress of mind consists for the most part in differentiation, in the resolution of an obscure and complex object into its component aspects, it is surely the stupidest of losses to confuse things which right reason has put asunder, to lose the sense of achieved distinctions, the distinction between poetry and prose, for instance,



or, to speak more exactly, between the laws and characteristic excellences of prose and verse composition.' And again, 'For in truth all art does but consist in the removal of surplusage, from the last finish of the gem-engraver blowing away the last particle of invisible dust, back to the earliest divination of the finished work to be, lying somewhere, according to Michelangelo's fancy, in the rough-hewn block of stone.' Style, in Pater, varied more than is generally supposed in the course of his development, and, though he never thought of it as a thing apart from what it expresses, it was with him a constant preoccupation. I am certain, from what he himself told me, that the origin of his style was Flaubert.

Has any imaginative critic ever absolutely fathomed what is most essential in that particular form we call Style?

There is in prose, whenever it is good prose, but not necessarily inherent in it, a certain rhythm, much laxer than that of verse, not, indeed, bound by formal laws at all: but, in its essence, like the intonation which distinguishes one voice from another in the repetition of a single phrase. Prose, in its rudimentary stage, is merely recorded speech; but, as one may talk in prose all one's life without knowing it, so it may be that the conscious form of verse (speech, that is, reduced to rules, and regarded as partly of the nature of music) was of earlier origin. A certain stage of civilisation must have been reached before it could have occurred to anyone that ordinary speech was worth being preserved. Verse is more easily remembered than prose, because of its recurrent beat, and whatever men thought worth remembering, either for its beauty (as a song or hymn)

or for its utility (as a law) would naturally be put into verse. Verse may well have anticipated the existence of writing, but hardly prose. The writing down of verse, to this day, is almost a materialisation of it; but prose exists only as a written document.

The rhythm of verse, that rhythm which distinguishes it from prose, has never been traced with any certainty to its origin. It is not even certain whether its origin is consequent upon the origin of music, or whether the two are independent in their similar but by no means identical capacity. That a sense of regular cadence, though no sense of rhyme, is inherent in our nature, such as it now is, may be seen by the invariably regular rhythm of children's songs and of the half inarticulate verse arrangements by which they accompany their games, and by the almost invariable inaccuracy

of their rhymes. It is equally evident that the pleasure which we derive from the regular beat of verse is inherent in us, from the susceptibility of children to every form of regular rhythm, from the rocking of the cradle to the sound of a lullaby. Prose cuts itself sharply off from this great inheritance of susceptibility to regular rhythm, and thus, by what is looked upon as natural or instinctive in it, begins its existence a lawless and accidental thing.

It is the danger and privilege of prose that it has no limits. The very form of verse is a concentration; you can load every rift with more ore. Prose, with its careless lineage direct from speech, has a certain impromptu and casualness about it: it has allowed itself so much license among trivialities that a too serious demeanour surprises; we are apt to be repelled by a too strait observance

of law on the part of one not really a citizen. And there is one thing that prose cannot do : it cannot sing. A distinction there is between prose and lyrical verse, even in actual language, because here words are used by rhythm as notes in music, and at times with hardly more than that musical meaning. As Joubert has said, in a figure which is a precise definition : ‘In the style of poetry every word reverberates like the sound of a well-tuned lyre, and leaves after it numberless undulations.’ The words may be the same, no rarer ; the construction may be the same or, by preference, simpler ; but, as the rhythm comes into it, there will come also something which, though it may be born of music, is not music. Call it atmosphere, call it magic ; say, again with Joubert : ‘Fine verses are those that exhale like sounds or perfumes’ ; we shall never

explain, though we may do something to distinguish, that transformation by which prose is changed miraculously into poetry.

To return to Flaubert, you will find that in each of his books there is a rhythm, perfectly appropriate to his subject-matter. That style, which has almost every merit and which is almost flawless, becomes what it is by a process very different from that of most writers careful of form. You can translate Baudelaire and Gautier: but Flaubert is so difficult to translate because he has no fixed rhythm and because he changes his cadences with every mood or for the convenience of every fact. For him form is a living thing, the physical body of thought, which it clothes and interprets. Take, for instance, one superb sentence from *Salammbô*: 'Ses yeux, ses diamants

étincelaient ; le poli de ses ongles continuait la finesse des pierres qui chargeaient ses doigts ; les deux agrafes de sa tunique, soulevent un peu ses seins, les rapprochaient l'un de l'autre, et il se perdait par la pensée dans leur étroit intervalle, où descendant une plaque d'émeraudes, que l'on apercevait plus bas sous la gaze violette.' Note particularly the wonderful, the exquisite, the perfect rhythm of this sentence, and ask yourself if Stendhal ever wove perfect rhythm into his prose.

Of Flaubert, Pater and I rarely met without speaking. And we agreed that *Madame Bovary* was not only a work of immense labour, but a work of great and original genius. And he pointed out to me some of its most perfect pages :

Le prêtre se releva pour prendre le crucifix : alors elle allongea le cou comme quelqu'un qui a soif, et, collant ses lèvres sur le corps de l'Homme-Dieu, elle y déposa de toute sa force expirante le plus grand baiser d'amour

qu'elle eût jamais donné. Puis, d'une voix distincte, elle demanda son miroir, et elle resta penchée dessus quelque temps, jusqu'au moment où de grosses larmes lui découlèrent des yeux. Alors elle se renversa la tête en poussant un soupir et retomba sur l'oreiller. Et 'L'Aveugle' s'écria-t-elle. Et Emma se mit à rire, d'un rire atroce, frénétique, désespéré, croyant voir la face hideuse du misérable, qui se dressait dans les ténèbres éternelles comme un épouvantement.

Pater's *Æsthetic Poetry*, dated 1868, was evidently written under the influence of Baudelaire, whose prose, as he himself told me, he admired immensely. In these pages, like the poet of *Les Fleurs du Mal*, he grasps after strange and subtle and morbid and narcotic delights, and after evil secrets, and after—

things tormented and awry with passion, where the accent falls in strange unwonted places with the effect of a great cry. Morris in his poems diffuses the maddening white glare of the sun. There is the sorcerer's moon, large and feverish. The colouring is intricate and delirious, as of scarlet lilies.



The influence of summer is like a poison in one's blood, with a sudden bewildered sickening in life of all things. A voice proclaims that the Grail has gone forth through the great forest. A passion of which the outlets are sealed begets a tension of nerves, in which the sensible world comes to one with a reinforced brilliancy and relief: all redness is turned into blood.

Let us compare this passage with the following translation from Baudelaire's account of the effects of Haschisch:

The sinuosity of lives is a definitely clear language in which you must decipher the agitation and the desire of souls. And yet this mysterious and temporary state of the spirit, where the depth of our existence, beset with multiple problems, reveals itself entirely in the spectacle, so natural and so trivial as it might be, that one has under one's eyes — where the first seen object becomes a speaking symbol. Fourier and Swedenborg, one with his analogies, the other with his *correspondences*, are incarnated in the vegetable and the animal who fell under your regard, and instead of teaching by the voice they instruct you by the form and by the colour. The intelligence of

what means to you allegory seizes in you proportions unknown to yourself. I shall note in passing that an allegory, this spiritual kind, which awkward painters are apt to despise but which is really one of the primitive and natural forms of poetry, takes over again its legitimate domination of one's intelligence when it is dazzled by one's intoxication. Haschisch extends itself across our life like a magic mirror; it colours it solemnly and darkens its depth. Vague landscapes, flying horizons, perspectives of white cities whitened by the cadaverous lividity of the Dawn, or illuminated by the concentrated ardours of setting suns—depths of space, allegory of the depth of time—the dance, the gesture, or the declamation of the comic actors—if you happen to be in a theatre—the first phrase that starts to your lips when your eyes fall on a book—in one word, and finally, the universality of Beings surges before you with an unimaginable glory. Grammar, the arid grammar, becomes something like an evocatory sorcery; words resuscitated clothe themselves in flesh and bones—the substantive, in its substantial majority—the adjective, a transparent vestment that colours it like the glazing on a painting, and the verb, an angel of movement that gives the swing to the phrase.

Music, another language dear to idle or to

deep minds who seek for relaxation in the variety of their creations, speaks to you and relates to you your Life's Poem ; it incorporates itself in you, and you melt into it. Music speaks your passions, not in an indefinite and vague manner, as it does in your nonchalant nights, or on an opera night, but in a circumstantial, positive manner, each cadence of the rhythm marking the malicious cadence of your soul, each note transforming itself into a word, as the entire poem enters your head like a Dictionary gifted with life.

In both, one finds much the same effects given in a different way almost as if a new order of phenomena had absorbed their attention, which became more and more externalised, more exclusively concerned with morbid sensations and with the curiosities of the mind and the senses. One of Baudelaire's profoundest sayings is: *Toute débauche parfaite à besoin d'un parfait loisir*. He gives his definition of the magic that imposes on haschisch its infernal stigmata ; of the soul that sells itself in

detail; of the frantic taste for this adorable poison of the man whose soul he had chosen for these experiments, his own soul; of how finally this hazardous spirit, driven, without being aware of it, to the edge of Hell, testifies of its original grandeur.

## VI

I FAIL to understand what Pater means when he says: 'But neither Germany, with its Goethe and Tieck, nor England with its Byron and Scott, is nearly so representative of the romantic temper as France, with Murger, and Gautier, and Victor Hugo. It is in French literature that its most characteristic expression is to be found.'

I cannot for a moment admit this statement. The Romantic Movement in France might be said to begin with Rousseau, so Pater suggests; he is followed by Chateaubriand, who is quite out-of-date; then follows Lamartine, who is equally out-of-date. Alfred de Vigny has touches and flashes of genius, but he is not a great poet. Victor Hugo, whose form of genius is so much more evident

in his novels than in his poetry, and whose dramas are all undramatic, was not essentially or wholly romantic. His astonishing literary career began in 1816, and it came to a by no means astonishing end in 1885. When he thought that he was thinking he was really listening to the inarticulate murmur that words make among themselves as they await the compelling hand of their master. Poem repeats poem like an echo ; always the same admirable form, finished to a kind of hard clear surface, off which the mind slips, without penetrating it. That the authentic vision can be found in Hugo when he is his finest self, we all know ; but in how much of his work do we not find that fundamentally insincere rhetoric which is not less fundamentally insincere when it is thundered from the hill-top. There is the poet to whom the vast joy of making is sufficient, who has no curiosity

concerning the work of his hands: who makes beauty, and leaves it to others to explain it. To work, with Hugo, was almost an automatic process; an enormous somnambulism carried his soul about the world of imagination.

Most of Hugo's personages—such as Josiane, Ursus, Claude Frollo, Javert and Cimourdain—are rarely the expressions of humanity, they are those of Hugo himself. You believe in them to a certain extent (being as far as possible the creations of his genius) but, after a time, you cannot: for he takes care to make belief impossible. Let Henley speak instead of me.

There can be no possible doubt that in many of the relations of life Hugo was a *poseur* of the first magnitude—that from the first he humbugged his contemporaries with a pertinacity and a success that are only equalled by his faculty of taking himself seriously. But there can be as little doubt that while essentially un-French—a combination of Teuton

and Celt, and moreover absolutely lacking in sanity—he was a lyrist of the first order, and such a master of words and cadences, and such an artist in rhymes and rhythms, that he may fairly be said to have made French poetry a palace builded of jewels, a palace of *The Arabian Nights*.

Théophile Gautier, like most Frenchmen who write at all, wrote enormously. He is exceptional, not in the quantity of his work, but in the quality. To be poet, novelist, and critic is nothing to a Frenchman; but it is not every one who can write poetry like the *Emaux et Camées*, tales like the *Nouvelles*, and criticisms like the *Portraits Contemporains*; to say nothing of such inspired Baedekers as the *Voyage en Espagne*. With Gautier the first need, the first capacity, was to write. The choice of subject was a quite secondary matter. He disliked the theatre, but, by a natural irony of fate, he spent a good deal of his life in writing dramatic



criticisms which, of course, he wrote admirably. Caring for quiet more than for most things, he was often obliged to write at the office of his paper, with an accompanying obligato of printing-presses. *Mademoiselle de Maupin* was written in six weeks, in the midst of every sort of distraction. For what lazy people call 'inspiration' he had the contempt of a workmanlike man of letters. The Goncourts, in that brilliant early novel *Charles Demailly*, have put into the mouth of Masson, who stands for Gautier, a sort of confession of faith to which Gautier, in a whimsical moment, might well have given utterance :

'I draw up my chair,' says Masson to a *poseur* who has been setting forth his system of work ; 'I put on the table the paper, the pens, the ink, all the instruments of torture, and how it bores me ! It has always bored me to write, and then it is so useless ! Well, I write like that, deliberately, like a notary public. I do not go fast, but I am always

going ; for, you see, I don't search for the best. An article, a page, is like a child : either it is or it is not. I never think about what I am going to write. I take my pen and write. I am a man of letters : I ought to know my trade. Here is the paper before me ; I am like the clown on his spring-board. And then I have a syntax very well in order in my head ; I throw my phrases into the air—like cats ! I am sure they will fall on their feet. It is quite simple : you only need to have a good syntax.'

So Gautier might really have said, knowing well just how much of sober truth went to the making of his paradoxes, which are not so paradoxical as they seem. What sounds like the confession of a contented hack is really the declaration of a perfectly accomplished master. For always, with Gautier, the work so hurriedly done, in seeming, was done with the same exquisite sense of form, the same exquisite finish of style. Apparently it was impossible for him to write badly. His style, like his handwriting, was so

perfectly under his control, that it was equally out of the question for him to compose a badly-formed sentence or to pen a badly-formed letter. Never was a compliment more deserved than the title of 'parfait magicien ès Lettres Françaises,' under which Baudelaire dedicated the *Fleurs du Mal* to his 'très-cher et très-vénéré maître et ami,' Théophile Gautier.

Murger has his faults as a writer; it cannot be said that his prose is distinguished, his taste impeccable, his tears or his laughter quite invariably convincing. But he wrote a book that lives, and there is no arguing against such a fact. It has been gravely inquired whether these *Scènes de la Vie de Bobême* are true to life; whether or not Musette, Rodolphe, and Mimi are probable characters. As long as men and women are young, and not quite virtuous, so long will this kind of life exist, just thus; and

never has it been rendered so simply, sympathetically, and with so youthful a touch of sentiment, as in Murger's pages. To be five-and-twenty, poor, and in love; that is enough; at that age and under those circumstances, you will feel that Murger has said everything. They tell us that the Latin Quarter has changed, that the *grisette* no longer exists, that people are quite cynical and serious nowadays, and that *Qui m'aima quand elle la belle eut le temps* has no time now. Ah! there is always time for these little distractions, when one cares to indulge in them; and youth, after all, is not so variable a quantity as our historians would have us imagine.

Having referred to these writers specially nominated by Pater as representative of the Romanticism of France, are there any other lesser lights of French literature

to dispose of? Sainte-Beuve does not count, nor Barbier, nor Moreau, nor Dumas—half genius and half charlatan—though he had a romantic and adventurous imagination. I can think of no other names. But let us turn to English Romanticism, and we shall find an infinite distance between the two Movements.

Pater mentions only Byron among the poets and Scott among the novelists; but there are many other poets, as, for instance, Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Lamb, Landor, Leigh Hunt, Peacock, Shelley, Keats, Hood. As you will see, there is no possible comparison between these and their French contemporaries and counterparts. And Scott is by no means the only Romanticist among the novelists of that period; and, while I cannot for a moment deny his creative genius, I must recognise how uncertain and how

limited that genius too often was. One must not forget the immense number of his characters, at their finest so wonderfully living and so full of passion, gesture and action, and that mastery of dialogue which he had; nor must we forget that he presents us with, as Swinburne says, 'from Bradwardine to Redgauntlet and onwards, what a chain of heroes'; but, from my point of view, too many of his heroines (many of whom have not even the ghost of an existence) are drawn with no psychological subtlety.

At his best, when he is thrilling and tragic and dramatic, Scott can even now thrill our senses and hold us in a suspense, but it has never seemed to me that he is a great artist. Think for a moment of Jane Austen, who was not romantic, but who, in her own way, was a perfect artist. She had wonderful gifts of her own in her limited creation of living men

and women, lovable and hateful, humorous and solemn, disagreeable and silly, and in the excellence of her dialogue; but she rarely stirs the heart or gives voice to authentic emotions, she is singularly lacking in passion and in dramatic conception, and she is enormously concerned with small details. She has, however, as Scott wrote, 'a talent for describing the involvements and feelings of ordinary life'; and in this sentence the writer, who was rarely a good critic, becomes one.

Then there are Thackeray and Dickens and Emily and Charlotte Brontë. Of Emily, Pater wrote:

Much later, in a Yorkshire village, the spirit of romanticism bore a more really characteristic fruit in the work of a young girl, Emily Brontë, the romance of *Wuthering Heights*: the figures of Hareton Earnshaw, of Catherine Linton, and of Heathcliff—tearing open Catherine's grave, removing one side of her coffin, that he may really lie beside

her in death—figures so passionate, yet woven on a background of delicately beautiful moorland scenery, being typical examples of that spirit.

*Wuthering Heights*—which is one long outcry, created by the only woman in whom there has been seen the paradox of passion without sensuousness, in whom passion was alive as flame is alive in the earth—can only be compared with what is perfectly attained in *King Lear* and *The Duchess of Malfi*. As Swinburne said in referring to Catherine's delirium—

From the first we breathe the fresh dark air of tragic passion and presage; and to the last the changing wind and flying sunlight are in keeping with the stormy promise of the dawn. It contains two incomparable pictures of dreamland and delirium which no poet that ever lived has ever surpassed for passionate and lifelike beauty of imaginative truth. The depth, the force, the sincerity recalling here so vividly the various forms of distraction through which Webster's *Cornelia* passes



after the murder of her son by his brother, excel everything else of the kind in imaginative art.

Then among the English Romantics are also Mrs Gaskell, Lord Lytton, Disraeli, and Charles Reade, and even Lever and Marryat. And there is also George Eliot. Nor must I forget Mrs Radcliffe, or Peacock, whose novels are unique in English and are among the most scholarly and original and entertaining prose writings of the century. I end my list with Meredith and Hardy.

## VII

PATER had an immense admiration of Browning. This he showed in his *Winckelmann* (1867)—a paper on one who certainly was the last fruit of the Renaissance, and explained in a striking way its motive and tendencies—in which he says that Browning's characters

seem to come to him by strange accidents from the ends of the world. . . . In the poem entitled *Le Byron de nos Jours* we have a single moment of passion thrown into relief in this exquisite way. Those two jaded Parisians are not intrinsically interesting; they begin to interest us only when thrown into a choice situation. But to discriminate that moment, to make it appreciable by us, that we may 'find it,' what a cobweb of allusions, what double and treble reflections of the mind upon itself, what an artificial light is constructed and broken over the chosen situation; on how fine a needle's point that little world of passion is balanced! Yet, in spite of this intricacy, the poem has

the clear ring of a central motive. We receive from it the impression of one imaginative tone, of a single creative act.

In his review of my *Introduction to the Study of Browning*, where the art of quotation is carried to perfection, passage after passage of the book being pieced together, from every corner of it, with an admirable effect of *ensemble*, the reviewer's far more valuable comments being introduced but sparsely, he says:

Imaginatively, indeed, Browning has been a multitude of persons; only (as Shakespeare's only untried style was the simple one) almost a never simple one. He is a master of all the arts of poetry. Like the lovers of his lyric, he has renounced the selfish serenities of wild wood and dream palace; he has fared up and down among men listening to the music of humanity, observing the acts of men, and he has sung what he has heard, and he has painted what he has seen. Will the work live? we ask, and we can only answer in his own words:

It lives  
If precious be the soul of man to man.

In the prose of Pater, thought moves to music, and he seems to listen for the thought, and to overhear it, as the poet overhears his song in the air. It is like music, and has something of the character of poetry, yet, above all, it is individual. But poetry will have nothing to do with real things, until it has translated them into a diviner world. So, Pater, whom Mallarmé called '*le prosateur ouvrage par excellence de ce temps*,' could at his rarest and most subtle moments, I might say, hours, of inspiration, transport us into a diviner world than our own. But the world of the poet may be as closely the pattern of ours as the worlds which Dante saw in Hell and Purgatory; and the language of the poet may be as close to the language of daily speech as the supreme

poetic language of Dante. But the personal or human reality and the imagination or divine reality must be perfectly interfused, or the art will be at fault.

## VIII

WHEN I first met Walter Pater, he was nearly fifty. I did not meet him for about two years after he had been writing to me, and his first letter reached me when I was just over twenty-one. I had been writing verse all my life, and what Browning was to me in verse Pater, from about the age of seventeen, had been to me in prose. Meredith made the third; but his form of art was not, I knew never could be, mine. Verse, I suppose, requires no teaching, but it was from reading Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance*, in its first edition on ribbed paper (I have the feel of it still in my fingers), that I realised that prose also could be a fine art. That book opened a new world to me, or, rather, gave me the

key or secret of the world in which I was living. It taught me that there was a beauty besides the beauty of what one calls inspiration, and comes and goes, and cannot be caught or followed; that life (which had seemed to me of so little moment) could be itself a work of art; from that book I realised for the first time that there was anything interesting or vital in the world besides poetry and music. I caught from it an unlimited curiosity, or, at least, the direction of curiosity into definite channels.

The knowledge that there was such a person as Pater in the world, an occasional letter from him, an occasional meeting, and, gradually, the definite encouragement of my work in which, for some years, he was unfailingly generous and attentive, meant more to me, at that time, than I can well indicate, or even realise, now. It was through him that

my first volume of verse was published; and it was through his influence and counsels that I trained myself to be infinitely careful in all matters of literature. Influence and counsel were always in the direction of sanity, restraint, precision.

I remember a beautiful phrase which he once made up, in his delaying way, with 'wells' and 'no doubts' in it, to describe, and to describe supremely, a person whom I had seemed to him to be disparaging. 'He does,' he said meditatively, 'remind me of, well, of a steam engine stuck in the mud. But he is so enthusiastic!' Pater liked people to be enthusiastic, but, with him, enthusiasm was an ardent quietude, guarded by the wary humour that protects the sensitive. He looked upon undue earnestness, even in outward manner, in a world through which the artist is bound to go on a wholly 'secret



errand' as bad form, which shocked him as much in persons as bad style did in books. He hated every form of extravagance, noise, mental or physical, with a temperamental hatred; he suffered from it, in his nerves and in his mind. And he had no less dislike of whatever seemed to him either morbid or sordid, two words which he often used to express his distaste for things and people. He never would have appreciated writers like Verlaine, because of what seemed to him perhaps unnecessarily 'sordid' in their lives. It pained him, as it pains some people, perhaps only because they are more acutely sensitive than others, to walk through mean streets, where people are poor, miserable, and hopeless.

Verlaine, apart from that unique genius of his which comes, as it were, by right of lineage in one direct line from François Villon to Charles Baudelaire, had

something certainly sordid about him : sordid only in this sense, the absolute negligence in the way he dressed. And, like those other great poets, he was fundamentally abnormal. Reflection in him is pure waste ; it is the speech of the soul, and the speech of his eyes that we must listen to in his verse, never the speech of the reason. And in Verlaine I found that single, childlike necessity of loving and of being loved, all through his life, and almost day by day and night by night, and on every page of his works. And I found it in him, unchanged in essence, but constantly changing form, in his chaste and unchaste devotion to women, in his passionate friendships with men, in his supreme mystical adoration of God.

And thus, having mentioned Verlaine, I must say that what Pater most liked

in poetry was the very opposite of such work as this, which he might have been supposed to like. I do not think it was actually one of Verlaine's poems, but something done after his manner in English, that some reviewer once quoted, saying: 'That, to our mind, would be Mr Pater's ideal of poetry.' Pater said to me, with a sad wonder, 'I simply don't know what he meant.' What he liked in poetry was something even more definite than can be got in prose, and he valued poets like Dante and like Rossetti for their 'delight in concrete definition,' not even quite seeing the ultimate magic of such things as *Kubla Khan* which, as I have already mentioned, he omitted in a brief selection from the poetry of Coleridge.

In the most interesting letter which I ever had from him, the only letter which went to six pages, he says:

12 EARL'S TERRACE,  
KENSINGTON, W.

Jan. 8, 1888.

MY DEAR MR SYMONS,

I feel much flattered at your choosing me as an arbiter in the matter of your literary work, and thank you for the pleasure I have had in reading carefully the two poems you have sent me. I don't use the word 'arbiter' loosely for 'critic,' but suppose a real controversy, on the question whether you shall spend your best energies in writing verse, between your poetic aspirations on the one side and prudence (calculating results) on the other. Well! judging by these two pieces, I should say that you have a poetic talent remarkable, especially at the present day, for precise and intellectual grasp on the matter it deals with. Rossetti, I believe, said that the value of every artistic product was in direct proportion to the amount of purely intellectual force that went to the initial conception of it: and it is just this intellectual conception which seems to me to be so conspicuously wanting in what, in some ways, is the most characteristic verse of our time, especially that of our secondary poets. In your own pieces, particularly your MS. *A Revenge*, I find Rossetti's requirement fulfilled, and should anticipate great things from one who has the talent of conceiving his

motive with so much firmness and tangibility —with that close logic, if I may say so, which is an element in any genuinely imaginative process. It is clear to me that you aim at this, and it is what gives your verses, to my mind, great interest. Otherwise, I think the two pieces of unequal excellence, greatly preferring *A Revenge* to *Bell in Camp*. Reserving some doubt whether the watch, as the lover's gift, is not a little bourgeois, I think this piece worthy of any poet. It has that aim of concentration and organic unity which I value greatly both in prose and verse. *Bell in Camp* pleases me less, for the same reason which makes me put Rossetti's *Jenny*, and some of Browning's pathetic-satiric pieces, below the rank which many assign them. In no one of the poems I am thinking of, is the inherent sordidness of everything in the persons supposed, except the one poetic trait then under treatment, quite forgotten. Otherwise, I feel the pathos, the humour of the piece (in the full sense of the word humour) and the skill with which you have worked out your motive therein. I think the present age an unfavourable one to poets, at least in England. The young poet comes into a generation which has produced a large amount of first-rate poetry, and an enormous amount of good secondary poetry. You know I give a high place to the literature of prose

as a fine art, and therefore hope you won't think me brutal in saying that the admirable qualities of your verse are those also of imaginative prose; as I think is the case also with much of Browning's finest verse. I should say, make prose your principal *métier*, as a man of letters, and publish your verse as a more intimate gift for those who already value you for your pedestrian work in literature. I should think you ought to find no difficulty in finding a publisher for poems such as those you have sent to me.

I am more than ever anxious to meet you. Letters are such poor means of communication. Don't come to London without making an appointment to come and see me here.

Very sincerely yours,

WALTER PATER.

'Browning, one of my best-loved writers,' is a phrase I find in his first letter to me, in December 1886, thanking me for the little book on Browning which I had just published. There is, I think, no mention of any other writer except Shakespeare (besides the reference to Rossetti which I have just quoted) in

any of the sixty letters which I have from him. Everything that is said about books is a direct matter of business; work which he was doing, of which he tells me, or which I was doing, about which he advises and encourages me.

In practical things Pater was wholly vague, troubled by their persistence when they pressed upon him. To wrap up a book to send by post was an almost intolerable effort; and he had another reason for hesitating. 'I take your copy of Shakespeare's sonnets with me,' he writes in June 1889, 'hoping to be able to restore it to you there lest it should get bruised by transit through the post.' He wrote letters with distaste, never really well, and almost always with excuses or regrets in them: 'Am so overburdened (my time I mean) just now

with pupils, lectures and the making thereof;’ or, with hopes for a meeting: ‘Letters are such poor means of communication: when are we to meet?’ or, as a sort of hasty makeshift: ‘I send this prompt answer, for I know by experience that when I delay my delays are apt to be lengthy.’ A review took him sometimes a year to get through, and remained in the end, like his letters, a little cramped, never finished to the point of ease, like his other writings. To lecture was a great trial to him. Two of the three lectures which I have heard in my life were given by Pater, one on *Mérimée*, at the London Institution, in November 1890, and the other on *Raphael*, at Toynbee Hall, in 1892. I never saw a man suffer a severer humiliation. The act of reading his written lecture was an agony which communicated itself to the main part of the



audience. Before going into the hall at Whitechapel he had gone into a church to compose his mind a little, between the discomfort of the old Underground railway and the distress of the lecture-hall.

In a room, if he was not among very intimate friends, Pater was rarely quite at his ease, but he liked being among people, and he made the greater satisfaction overcome the lesser reluctance. He was particularly fond of cats, and I remember one evening, when I had been dining with him in London, the quaint, solemn, and perfectly natural way in which he took up the great black Persian, kissed it, and set it down carefully again on his way upstairs. Once at Oxford he told me that Bourget had sent him the first volume of his *Essais de Psychologie Contemporaine*, and that the cat had got hold of the book and torn up

the part containing the essay on Baudelaire, 'and as Baudelaire was such a lover of cats I thought she might have spared him!'

We were talking once about fairs, and I had been saying how fond I was of them. He said: 'I am fond of them, too. I always go to fairs. I am getting to find they are very similar.' Then he began to tell me about the fairs in France, and I remember, as if it were an unpublished fragment in one of his stories, the minute, coloured impression of the booths, the little white horses of the 'roundabouts,' and the little wild-beast shows, in which what had most struck him was the interest of the French peasant in the wolf, a creature he might have seen in his own woods. 'An English clown would not have looked at a wolf if he could have seen a tiger.'

I once asked Pater if his family was really connected with that of the painter, Jean-Baptiste Pater. He said: 'I think so; I believe so; I always say so.' The relationship has never been verified, but one would like to believe it; to find something lineally Dutch in the English writer. It was, no doubt, through this kind of family interest that he came to work upon Goncourt's essay and the contemporary *Life of Watteau* by the Count de Caylus, printed in the first series of *L'Art du XVIII<sup>e</sup> Siècle*, out of which he has made certainly the most living of his *Imaginary Portraits*, that Prince of Painters, which is supposed to be the journal of a sister of Jean-Baptiste Pater, whom we see in one of Watteau's portraits in the Louvre.

In 1889 Pater was working towards a second volume of *Imaginary Portraits* of which *Hippolytus Veiled* was to have

been one. He had another subject in Moroni's *Portrait of a Tailor* in the National Gallery, whom he was going to make a Burgomaster; and another was to have been a study of life in the time of the Albigensian persecution. There was also to be a modern study: could this have been *Emerald Uthwart*? No doubt *Apollo in Picardy*, published in 1893, would have gone into the volume.

*The Child in the House* was really meant to be the first chapter of a romance which was to show 'the poetry of modern life.' There is much personal detail in it, the red hawthorn, for instance; and he used to talk to me of the old house in Tunbridge, where his great-aunt lived, and where he spent much of his time when a child. He remembered the gipsies there, and their caravans, when they came down for the hop-picking;

and the old lady in her large cap going out on the lawn to do battle with the surveyors who had come to mark out a railway across it; and his terror of the train, and of the red flag, 'which meant *blood*.' It was because he always dreamed of going on with it that he did not reprint this imaginary portrait in the book of *Imaginary Portraits*; but he did not go on with it because, having begun the long labour of *Marius*, it was out of his mind for many years, and when he still spoke of finishing it, he was conscious that he could never continue it in the same style, and that it would not be satisfactory to rewrite it in his severer, later manner. It remains, perhaps fortunately, a fragment to which no continuation could ever add a more essential completeness.

The aim of criticism is to distinguish what is essential in the work of a writer ;

